

Avian Pandemic Influenza (FLU)

Fact Sheet



Avian influenza (flu) is a contagious disease that normally affects only birds and (less commonly) pigs. Recent outbreaks of avian flu among birds in Asia and Europe have resulted in the quarantine and destruction of millions of domesticated birds in an effort to keep the virus from spreading worldwide. Although avian flu does not readily spread to humans, there have been documented cases where people have been infected by the virus and became ill or died. Scientists are concerned that the avian flu virus has the potential to cause the next worldwide (pandemic) flu, potentially resulting in the severe illness and death of millions of people. Local, national and global efforts are underway to develop and implement an effective strategy to combat this potential health threat.

What is avian influenza (flu)?

Avian flu is an infectious disease in birds caused by a virus called H5N1. The H5N1 virus is carried in the intestines of wild birds and can be found worldwide. Wild birds are variably resistant to the virus and may not get sick. However, the disease is very contagious and more severe in domestic poultry such as chickens, ducks and turkeys and can quickly infect and kill large numbers of these birds. Recent outbreaks of the avian flu in poultry farms in both Asia and Europe have resulted in the quarantine and destruction of millions of birds in an attempt to control spread of the virus.

Can avian flu infect people?

The H5N1 avian flu virus does not usually infect species other than birds (and less frequently, pigs), but over a hundred cases in humans have been documented since 1997. Scientific investigations have determined that close contact with infected birds allowed the avian virus to be transmitted to humans.

Subsequent bird outbreaks have resulted in additional human cases, some resulting in deaths, which have alarmed public health officials because of the severity of the illness and the high death rate.

How is avian flu spread?

Infected birds shed the H5N1 virus in their saliva, nose secretions and feces. Other birds become easily infected when they come into contact with these excretions or surfaces recently contaminated with them. It is believed that most human cases of avian flu infection resulted from contact with infected birds or contaminated surfaces. So far, direct spread of the H5N1 avian flu virus from person to person has not been confirmed.

What is pandemic flu?

Pandemic flu is a global outbreak of disease that occurs when:

- * A new influenza virus appears in the human population;
- * Causes serious illness or death; and
- * Spreads easily from person to person.

There have been three previous occurrences of pandemic flu in the 20th century. These flu pandemics occurred in 1918-19 (the Spanish flu), 1957-58 (the Asian flu) and 1968-69 (the Hong Kong flu). The Spanish flu was the most severe pandemic flu on record, killing more than 500,000 people in the United States and an estimated 50 million people worldwide. Nearly half of those who died were young, healthy adults.

The Asian flu and the Hong Kong flu were both caused by viruses containing a combination of genes from human and avian influenza virus.

There is also growing evidence that the Spanish flu pandemic originated with a type of avian flu. Scientists now believe the H5N1 avian flu virus has potential to cause the next pandemic flu.

How can H5N1 avian flu cause a new pandemic flu?

The H5N1 avian flu virus currently circulating in Asia and Europe does not easily spread from person to person. However, viruses are constantly changing, adapting and evolving. There is growing concern that it may develop into a new strain capable of spreading quickly and efficiently throughout the world's population, if it combines and mutates with seasonal flu.

When will the next pandemic flu hit the United States?

The H5N1 avian flu virus is still primarily a disease of wild and domestic birds and rarely, other livestock. We cannot say with certainty when (and if) this virus will cause the next pandemic flu outbreak. Pandemic flu occurs naturally and it is not possible to accurately predict the timing or severity of such diseases.

How will pandemic flu spread from person to person?

Pandemic flu is spread primarily through "respiratory secretions", the same way that the common cold, seasonal flu and other respiratory infections are spread. Respiratory secretions are virus-containing droplets (such as mucous or spit) that are dispersed into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets can then be inhaled directly into the body through the nose or mouth or be picked up from a contaminated surface and spread from one's hand to the mouth or nose.

Are there medications that treat avian flu or pandemic flu?

There is some evidence that anti-viral medications, such as oseltamavir and zanamavir, are effective in treating flu caused by the H5N1 virus. To be effective they must be given within the first 2 days of onset of illness. Additional scientific studies are ongoing to verify their effectiveness.

What can I do to protect myself from pandemic flu?

People can protect themselves from pandemic flu the same way they protect themselves from getting the common seasonal flu. Begin now to practice the following simple, but important habits:

- Cover your mouth and nose when sneezing
- Properly dispose of soiled tissues
- Practice good hygiene with frequent hand washing
- Avoid close contact with sick people and stay home when you are sick
- Stay informed of local, state and national news and reports on treating and controlling the disease

What is our country doing to protect us from pandemic flu?

Current planning for pandemic flu includes improving worldwide monitoring for the appearance of new flu viruses, procuring and stockpiling anti-viral medications, researching the development of new vaccines and improving overall communications regarding this emerging health threat.

A national strategy for pandemic influenza was also signed out by the President of the United States and distributed on 1 November 2005. This plan outlines our national goals for preparedness and communication; surveillance and detection; and overall response and containment.

The Navy/Marine Corps have responded by developing Pandemic Flu Response Plans for each Military Treatment Facility. Site-specific Public Health Emergency Officers have been assigned at each to implement these plans as quickly and efficiently as possible.

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